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# DESTINATION: SAN BENITO ISLANDS

David and Joyce MacFall Roderick

Photographs by the authors

THE rising sun, glinting off the flat silver sea, silhouetted the rugged San Pedro Mártir Cordillera. Looking out the plane's windows, we could see the backbone of Baja California's peninsula on our left and the Pacific on our right. We shared the fuselage of the vintage DC-3 with two freight-handlers employed by Aerocarga Airlines, several cartons of peeping baby chicks, wooden crates of shaggy lettuces and celery, as well as many boxes of more mysterious freight also bound for the holidays on Cedros Island. Our gear, consisting of three backpacks loaded with food and sleeping bags, two large containers of water, a plant press, collecting buckets, and much camera equipment, was cluttered about our feet as we sat in webbing harness seats along the sides. After an hour of flight, the captain invited us to join him and two other passengers in the cabin to film the landing.

A large, mountainous island loomed into view. As the plane passed over the north end of the long, narrow island, the drab browns and

grays of the barren hills were interrupted by a small stand of dark green pines. Wide arroyos were interwoven with dry rivulets heading toward cobble beaches and the sea. A prominent peak near the island's center served as a bulwark against the dense cloud layers on the west and the sun-shrouded landscape to the east. Several thousand feet below lay the only town, isolated against the backdrop of desolate mountains. The pilot circled once over the town to announce his arrival and continued to the airstrip five miles to the south. The plane landed smoothly on the gravel strip and in a few minutes we stepped out into warm, sunny day, 1000 miles southwest of cold, rainy San Francisco.

As the crew transferred the cargo into the waiting trucks, we congratulated ourselves on the successful completion of the first stage of our long planned expedition. Each of us had different interests and training, but we pooled them advantageously to explore this fascinating corner of Mexico. David, who teaches chemistry at Foothill

Rookery scene during breeding season on Central San Benito Island. The dominant bull is in the center surrounded by his mates. Several other bulls are awaiting opportunities around the periphery of the group of female elephant seals. Yearling elephant seals and a few sea lions are scattered around the beach.



Right, map of Baja California showing locations of Cedros and San Benito islands in relation to Ensenada. Below, inside the cargo plane that brought the authors to Cedros Island. Bottom, metamorphic and lava rocks on the coast near San Augustin on the southwest corner of Cedros Island.



College, wanted to film the people and wildlife for a documentary film he is making about western Baja California. As a biologist and graduate student at San Jose State College, Joyce wished to study the plant and animal life. We were joined by Howard Buettgenbach, Torrance high school biology teacher, who has traveled extensively throughout the peninsula, exploring and mapping independently. He wanted to gather specimens and record observations for use in his teaching. We were especially looking forward to studying and photographing the great elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) native to the area. Talks with Dr. George E. Lindsay of the California Academy of Sciences and Sr. Guillermo Bátiz, chief of the fisheries bureau for Baja California, had first interested us in Cedros and the San Benito Islands. We made our final arrangements with Sr. Salvador León, port captain and fisheries inspector on Cedros Island, during one of our planning visits with Sr. Bátiz in Ensenada.

Because we were on our own without a travel or study grant, we wished to travel as economically as possible within our 18-day Christmas vacation period. We found that the round-trip flight from Ensenada to Cedros cost only \$29.00 with Aerocarga Airlines, whose regular runs supply the island with perishables and passengers. Wishing to be mobile and self-sufficient, we planned a Spartan diet of light dried food to be supplemented with seafood. With typical *gringo* caution, we packed in about five gallons of water.

Cedros Island is 23 miles long and 4 to 11 miles wide, very similar in size to Catalina Island.





Some four thousand people support themselves here mainly by lobster, abalone, and sardine fishing and canning. Originally the island was inhabited by the Cochimi Indians. It was discovered in the early 1500's by Spanish explorers and was used as a watering stop by the Manila galleons on their voyages to Acapulco from the Orient. By 1732 the Jesuits' influence among the Indians was sufficient to persuade them to move to Mission San Ignacio on the mainland. During the intervening years, the island was frequented by seal and otter hunters, whalers, miners, and fishermen. The large numbers of local sardines and shellfish induced an Ensenada company to set up canning operations there in the early 1920's.

We caught our first glimpse of the town as we rumbled past the outdoor boxing arena atop cemetery hill. The most imposing buildings were the twin-spired church and the quonset cannery building at the water's edge. Boats were tied up to the cannery pier which supported an electric crane and conveyor, machine shop, barrels of diesel oil, and bags of fish meal. As we approached this establishment, its odor came to meet us. Sr. León, a small, dapper man, greeted us cordially at the doorway of his home next to the cannery headquarters, and asked us to breakfast.

We tried to plan with our host the remaining days on the island and pinpoint a departure date for the San Benito Islands where the elephant seals breed. Christmas in Mexico, our host explained, is a family affair, the most festive holiday of the year, and fishermen and their families would be gathering either on Cedros or Ensenada. As a result, no boats would be going to the outlying islands until after Christmas. Certainly, he thought, we would be able to get under way on the 26th at the latest.

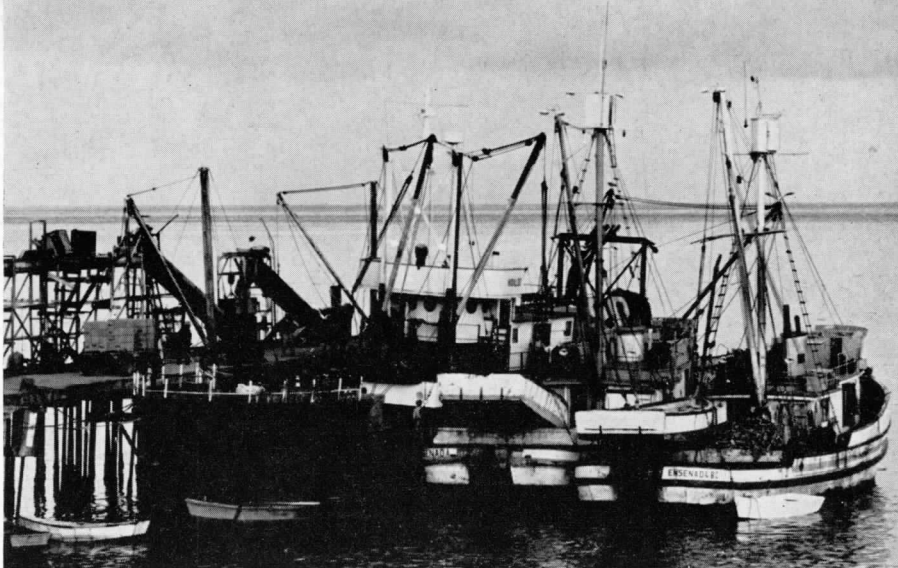
We set up temporary sleeping quarters on the seaside porch of the cannery radio building and moved our most valuable equipment into Sr. León's house. We spent the next week on Cedros in small adventures—going tidepooling, visiting the local school, climbing Cerro Cenizo, the mountain at the island's center, and enjoying the gracious hospitality of Sr. León and his eight-year-old son, Joél. A widower for some years, Sr. León had first of necessity and then with pride become a fine gourmet cook. Christmas Eve was celebrated at his house with a feast of whole chickens baked in butter, quantities of rice in a hot sauce, and beans with onions and cheese, accompanied by three good wines from Baja California's own San Martín vineyard. The church towers rang with carols



*Above*, church and main plaza at Cedros Island village. Cemetery hill is in the background. *Below*, lobstermen from San Augustin fishing camp, Cedros Island, in their *panga*, setting out their traps. *Bottom*, typical lobster camp at San Augustin Bay on Cedros Island.



*Right*, cargo fleet tied up at the fish canning company pier on Cedros Island. *Below*, passengers aboard the *San Cristobal* leaving from cannery pier, en route to San Benito Island. Sr. Salvador Leon, fisheries inspector and port captain, is adjusting his movie camera.



played over a loudspeaker, and mariachi bands, flown over from the mainland, were playing in the main street with great gusto. During the evening neighbors dropped in to share the food and tequila, Cinzano and lime that followed. At midnight we attended high mass celebrated by two Franciscan priests who had flown in especially for this holy day.

The morning of the 27th, little Joél burst into our sleeping quarters shouting, "We're going, we're going!" We quickly got together all of our gear and hurried down to the pier. Senor León introduced us to Captain José Molina, master of the *San Cristobal*, the company supply boat for the abalone fishermen. Captain Molina was a heavy-set, weatherbeaten man with a mass of gray curly hair, dressed in comfortable old clothes. He scanned the cloudy sky and told us that a storm was blowing up, but, the Lord willing, we would be on West San Benito that night. The pier was crowded with small boys and several men still celebrating the fiesta of Christmas. Two crewmen, three fishermen, then a woman and five children

with a puppy in tow climbed aboard. About noon we cast off on the second leg of our adventure.

When we rounded the southwest point of Cedros Island and headed north, the sea, freed from the land barrier, became much rougher. Along the way we watched for signs of the gray whale and fished two handlines with feathered jigs over the stern, hoping to entice one of the many game fish in the area. These waters are particularly well-known for yellowtail, cabrillo, tuna, mackerel, and bonito. The summer season is reportedly the more productive, however, and we waited in vain for our fish dinner.

Two hours later a trio of low, barren land masses were sighted on the horizon. Together with Cedros, the San Benito Islands appear to be extensions of Sierra Vizcaino and complete the giant hook that encloses Sebastián Vizcaino Bay. We headed for West Island, the largest and highest of the three. The twisted schists, sparkling quartzites and quartz-intruded cherts attest to the once-violent forces that shaped this two-mile-long island. On its east end, West Island sports a lighthouse which is tended by a caretaker the entire year. The *San Cristobal* is its lifeline, bringing in all water, food, and equipment.

Two skiffs came out to meet us as we slipped into the natural harbor. The cargo of food and cheer for the New Year was unloaded and taken ashore first. We soon followed with packs, cameras, and children. We were greeted on the beach by an impromptu welcoming committee composed of fishermen and their families. After a brief exchange of introductions, the men waded into the surf and beached the boats above the water line. The lighthouse keeper, a wiry man with a sun-bronzed face, immediately invited us to his house up on the sea-cliff for coffee. Leaving our gear on the beach, we climbed the cliff and entered the dim, cool, frame house where Maria Refugio,



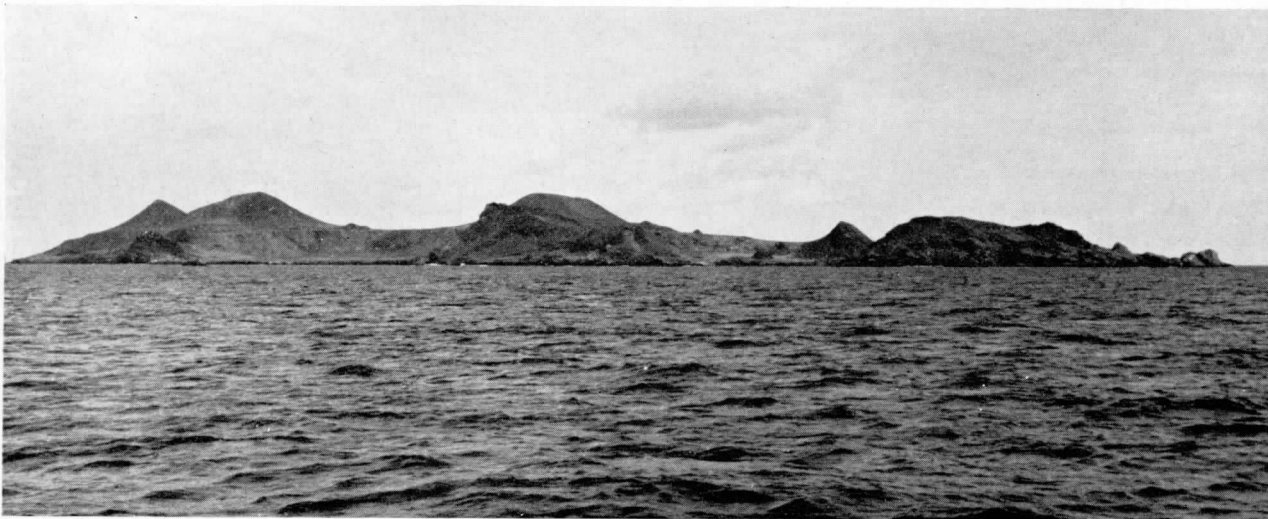
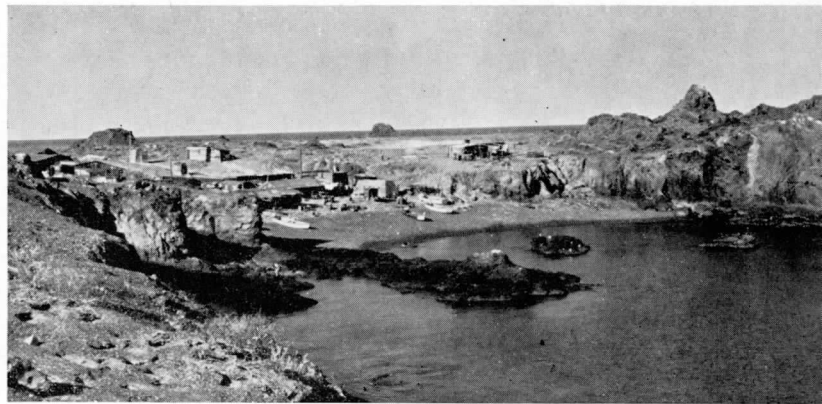
his wife, shooed away the chickens and dogs who were foraging crumbs from the earthen floor.

We asked the lighthouse keeper if he knew of a good spot to make camp. Maria was horrified and explained with very descriptive gestures that the half-starved burros roaming the island would eat everything we owned—sleeping bags, ground tarps, packs and all. Burros had been imported many years ago to pack supplies over to the lighthouse from the village, and they have ravaged the accessible vegetation. She immediately sent her sixteen-year-old daughter, Chavela, down to the beach to clean out one of the vacant shacks. We anxiously followed to view our new residence. Chavela pointed to a small, weathered, wooden dwelling that abutted the cobble beach and faced the sea. She explained that it was once their own house, but after several high tides washed the furniture out the front door her father built a new one on the cliff. We entered the musty, dismal interior that separated into two rooms, and closely examined the cracks between the board walls. They were alive with many varieties of spiders including the black widow. Before we could demur, the swarthy teenager vigorously swept the dirt floor clean of bottles, papers, and rocks, and sprinkled it with fresh water to drive out the fleas. She was an energetic worker, and she smiled with satisfaction when the job was completed. Her thin, smooth face was accented by lovely, brown eyes that betrayed a curiosity about us and a desire to please. We thanked her and were about to spread the sleeping bags when she rushed out of the hut and pointed to the square lobster traps scattered about the beach. When we looked puzzled, she explained that the ground was infested with small spiders whose bites made a huge bump which lasted a year or more. We quickly agreed that the lobster pots would make an excellent bed-frame, dragged several inside, and spread our sleeping bags over three of the most comfortable

looking. Just then Maria rushed into the now crowded hut and sprayed every crack in the walls and ceiling with a chemical mixture whose odor was sufficiently powerful to rid the area of humans as well as vermin.

After setting up housekeeping we returned to the house on the cliff to say good-bye to Captain Molina. He promised to return for us in three days, weather permitting. Dinner was in preparation and, of course, we were expected to stay. Maria had prepared a chicken from her little flock especially for us by stewing it with tomatoes and chilies. Chavela made fresh tortillas constantly while we ate. Our conversation during the meal centered upon the elephant seals that we had come so far to see. We later swapped stories about seals, whales, fishermen, and weather, and the evening passed all too soon. After dark we made our way to our shack by the light of a borrowed kerosene lantern.

We slept restlessly dreaming of seals and scratching our imaginary spider bites. Soft voices and the thump of boats being hauled over the beach cobbles awakened us early the next morning. We dressed hastily and stepped outside in time to watch eight shadowy forms board the four boats



*Above, cove and village, West San Benito Island.  
Left, view of West San Benito Island from the south.*



Howard Buettgenbach and helper cook breakfast in front of visitors' quarters on the beach at West San Benito Island.

that comprised the local fishing fleet. While we prepared instant oatmeal with powdered milk and raisins over a small campfire on the beach, Maria's son, Alberto, came down and watched us cautiously. He was not much older than his sister, but solemn and serious in manner. A black felt baseball cap shadowed his dark eyes. Suddenly he smiled and pointed out into the cove where, two hundred feet from shore, a great, dark form surfaced and then disappeared. "Elephante!" Alberto cried, and we rushed to the water's edge to see if it would appear again. After a moment we hurriedly put away our breakfast utensils and rounded up our camera gear. With Alberto in the lead, we set out to find the elephants of the sea.

As we followed him along a narrow path at the edge of the seacliff, our ears picked up intriguing sounds over the roar of the surf. These grew louder and louder, and when the trail rounded a bend we looked with astonishment at the immense brown lumps below us from which emanated blats, shrieks, belches, and yelps. Suddenly a big bull rose up on his stubby front flippers and snorted his peculiar metallic challenge sound at a bachelor bull who was inching toward the challenger's group of cows. The intruder also reared his head and returned the challenge, swinging the end of his flabby pink snout into his open mouth to act as a resonator. The dominant bull lunged like a giant caterpillar at the other, his momentum landing him on top of some of his wives, who bawled their protest. He scrambled toward the water's edge scattering seals and cobbles in every direction. The bachelor turned and fled into the sea, whereupon the defender, with a mighty exhalation, collapsed into a pile of contented blubber with his chin resting on the back of an obliging mate.

Everywhere we looked, brief dramas of the mating season were being enacted. The cows with young were particularly bellicose. As we approached a harem, these formidable ladies, eight feet long, weighing a ton, opened their pink, tooth-lined jaws and admonished us to keep away with a challenge that was half a belch and half a roar. They rarely retreated, a fact which caused us some concern lest we accidentally come within reach of a gaping mouth.

The battle-scarred bull, meanwhile, had lethargically raised his head to inspect the strange intruders upon his peaceful domain. With ready cameras, we edged toward him. The huge beast tossed his head and bellowed a warning, watching us with one eye. We advanced, making mental note of the handiest escape route. When we were within arm's reach he clumsily backed away. We yelled at him, and he lurched off toward the water, his ton of blubber rippling over his massive frame. In the water the mammoth creature was anything but awkward. He swam away from us with powerful though graceful body undulations, then reversed in deeper water to watch us with head and tail flippers held above the sea's surface. Suddenly he exhaled violently, roiling the water with white bubbles, and slowly sank from sight.

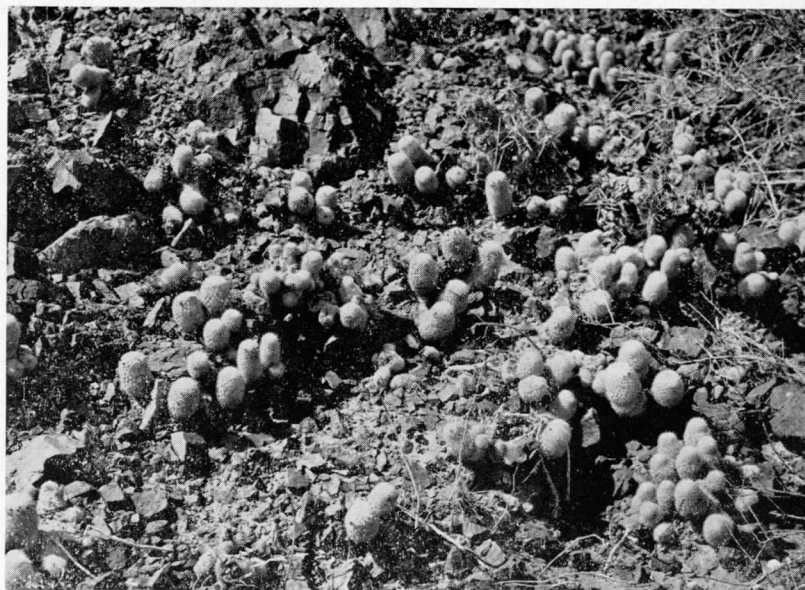
We were surprised at the timidity of the bulls, for their two or three ton, sixteen-foot hulks were awe-inspiring. Herein lies a major weakness of the species, however, which nearly led to its extinction sixty years ago—they will rarely initiate an attack on man. In fact, they are usually placid in his presence. Nineteenth century whalers found the elephant seals such a rich oil source that by 1890 they were believed to be extinct. Later it was found that a few had escaped the slaughter on Mexico's westernmost island, Guadalupe Island. When Guadalupe was officially proclaimed a government reserve in 1922, the slow recovery of these unique mammals began. By 1928 a colony had resettled on the San Benito Islands. Thousands have now established rookeries on the California offshore islands as far north as Monterey Bay.

The most attractive things about the elephant seals are their big gentle brown eyes and their babies. These little fellows were covered with black velvet fur, soft to the touch. We scratched their chins and stomachs and shook their hands while they yelped like puppy-dogs. The size of the pups suggested that most had been born within the month. Reportedly they gain weight at an incredible rate. Feeding exclusively on their mothers' rich milk, they may add twenty pounds a day



during their first three weeks of life. Infant mortality is high during this time, however. The chief hazard is the breeding activity of the adults. We found many pathetic pancake-flat carcasses on the beach, crushed in the onslaughts of rival bulls or quarreling females. Those that survive the first year may live to mate many times during their ten to fifteen years.

That night we were lulled to sleep by the sound of the waves lapping at our doorstep only to be awakened just before dawn by the clanking and clattering of the burros scavenging among the tin cans and refuse on the beach. After breakfast we loaded our camera gear into the lighthouse keeper's skiff and motored over to the central island, a fifteen-minute run. The gulls screamed a warning to the California sea lions sunning on the offshore rocks, and suddenly the water was teeming with bobbing, bewhiskered heads appraising this unusual intrusion. Indeed, throughout the morning we found it impossible to approach these alert creatures unless we wiggled across the ground on our bellies, seal-fashion. This was not as difficult as one might suppose, for the constant animal traffic on this small island which rises no more than 60 feet above the sea has compacted the soil and cleared off the plants for a hundred yards above the waterline. Above this line, the main form of plant life is the "little old man" cactus, *Mamillaria neopalmeri*, reportedly endemic to these islands. This tiny, gray-green cactus, some bearing both flowers and fruit, carpeted the upper regions of the island. Some were denuded of spines and shiny, perhaps polished by the bodies of seals as they dragged themselves all over the island. We also collected *Frankenia palmeri* and a pretty, blue-flowered mallow, *Lavatera venosa*.



Top, mammillaria cacti, an important form of plant life on the San Benito Islands. (Photograph by George E. Lindsay.) Above, young California sea lions sunning on West San Benito Island. Left, Howard Buettgenbach photographing a harem bull on West San Benito Island.



Below, lobster fisherman from West San Benito Island with a prize catch. Right, Maria Refugio, grand dame of the San Benito Islands, to whom the authors are greatly indebted for her wonderful hospitality.



We found many immature sea lions basking on the upland rocks where they go to escape the turmoil of the breeding activities of their elders on the beach. Young bull elephant seals snoozed peacefully in the sun high on the beach, also avoiding the tumult. Too immature to take mates, they were mere spectators, intermittently watching the tactics of the adults between naps. The beach, however, was a vast profusion of black mounds. Harems of a dozen elephant cows were spread along the shore guarded by jealous males. The life patterns of West Island were repeated here by the more than 500 elephant seals who mingled amicably with the thousands of California sea lions.

When we arrived back on West Island, we described our new adventures to Maria and her family, who invited us to share a late lunch. Maria was a wonderful person who continually impressed us with her graciousness and concern. Her tanned face was made beautiful by her vivacity and cheerfulness. She piled lobster after lobster



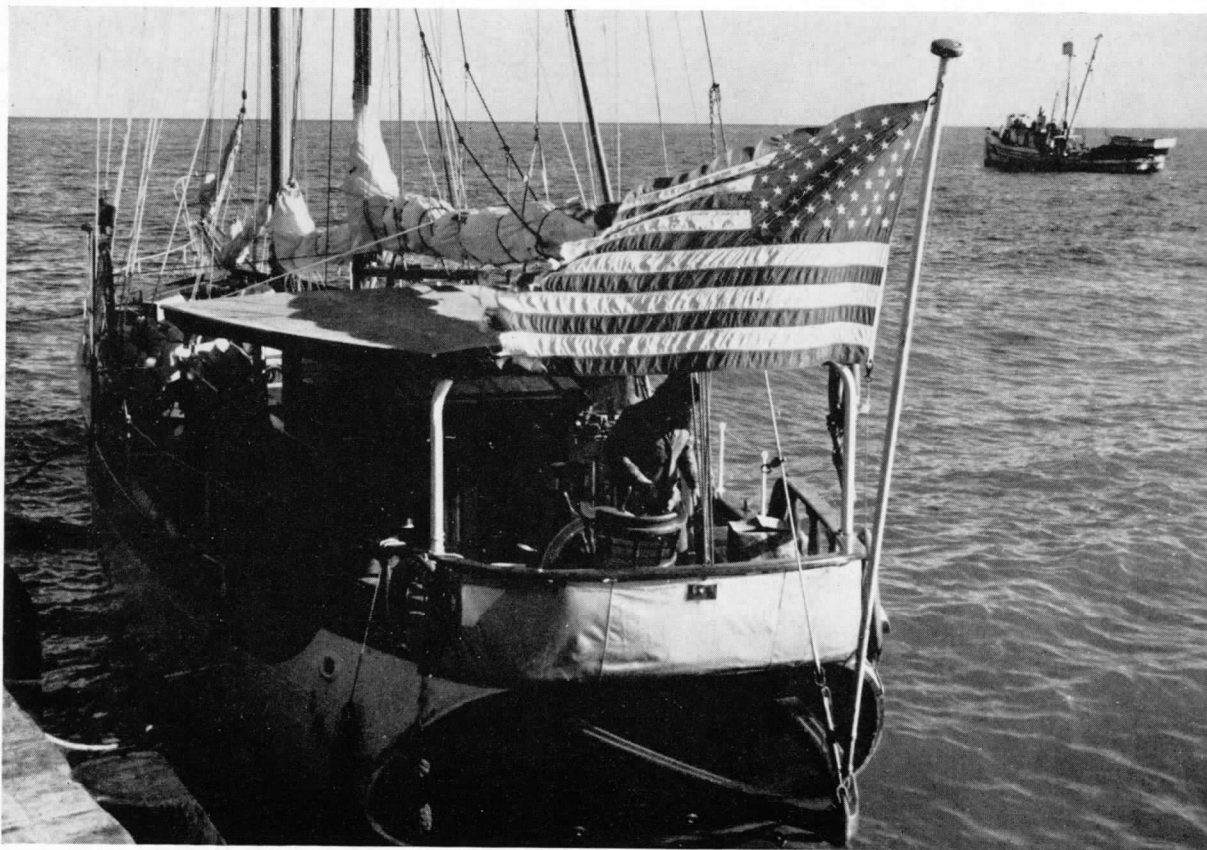
on our plates until we had eaten fifteen among us. In the afternoon, Howard set out to find the lighthouse, while we went back to the nearby cove to film the elephant seals and to make a tape-recording of their sounds. Along the way we collected several ice plants and, high on a steep hillside, some yellow century plant flowers that the burros had not yet devoured. That evening we packed our gear, for Captain Molina had promised to return for us in the early afternoon of the next day. We passed the following morning demonstrating the wonders of the tape recorder or *grabador* to our friends, fishing with a handline in the cove, and tidepooling, but we waited in vain for the *San Cristobal*. Though we had a tasty fish caught by little Joél for dinner, we were becoming uneasy about our schedule of return to San Francisco. If we missed the Friday plane from Cedros to Ensenada, we would be stranded on the island until the following Tuesday or Wednesday and we had classes to teach those days. Our hosts assured us there would be a boat *mañana*. When we awoke, astonishingly, a streamlined fisheries patrol boat was anchored in the cove. Quickly Sr. León made arrangements with the captain, a colleague in the government fisheries agency, to take us back to Cedros. We sailed about midmorning and passed the *San Cristobal* laboring to the San Benitos through heavy seas at noon. But, to our dismay, when we disembarked at Cedros, we learned that we had missed our plane. Again the Mexicans held out hope for *mañana*, New Year's Eve.

That night it rained solid sheets of water and by morning the town square was a muddy brown lake. The company radio operator reported that a plane was arriving at 10:00 A.M. Hurriedly we packed our gear, made our goodbyes, and took our favorite yellow taxi to the airstrip. Imagine our feelings when the plane circled the field and made a low pass, only to streak away to the south without landing. Later we were told that the gravel strip in its wet condition would not have provided traction for the heavily loaded plane; it would have slid in the greasy adobe and possibly crashed had it attempted to land. We dashed back to town to send a wire to our schools explaining that we would be some days late, but the radio shack was closed for the day in preparation for the coming celebration. The blow was partially softened, however, by the prospect of a New Year's celebration. Once again we unpacked and went over to help our host with the preparation of the traditional New Year's Eve dinner.

Two separate main dishes—*arroz con pollo*, the famous chicken and rice, and mackerel simmered in tomato and onion sauce, were served, accompanied as usual by a bevy of wines. Neighbors dropped in throughout the evening to share the food and drink, and offer season's greetings. At midnight in addition to American kisses, we exchanged Mexican *abrazos* and shot off assorted pistols into the air in the town square.

Again it rained all night. By morning the realization of our helplessness weighed upon us in full measure. But as Howard opened the door of our sleeping quarters on the way to breakfast, he suddenly let out a great whoop of joy. We rushed to see what he was pointing to and beheld the beauty of the *Destiny*, an 83-foot schooner owned by Captain Horace Brown of Beverly Hills. When we had explained our predicament to Captain Brown, he phoned our schools on his radio telephone and invited us to accompany him to Ensenada as crew members. We signed on fast! After fueling up, the *Destiny* got under way in the late afternoon, Sunday, January 1. Fortified with Dramamine, we took turns cooking and serving meals. In the afternoon we watched the porpoises surf in the bow wave sparkling in the brilliant sun.

That evening we read and caught up on our notes in the mahogany-paneled saloon below, which was decorated with signed pictures of the world's celebrities. A pastel portrait of Marian Davies, the captain's late wife, held the place of honor beside a tiny fireplace. After thirty hours of sailing, we watched fascinated as the captain threaded his way through the offshore islands and finally brought the *Destiny* to anchor amid the twinkling lights of the harbor in Ensenada from whence we had departed 16 days and many adventures before. ❀



Schooner *Destiny*, owned by Captain Horace Brown, who rescued the authors from Cedros Island when they were detained because the island's only airstrip had been washed out by a heavy rain.